The Pornography of Destruction: Performing Annihilation in *The Dying Animal*

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ABSTRACT. Reviewers and critics of *The Dying Animal* have tended to see this novella as a work of pornography in the prosaic sense, accusing Roth of creating a tired simulacrum of his earlier, disturbing examinations of human sexuality. This essay, by contrast, argues that *The Dying Animal* is Roth's exploration of an existential "pornography of destruction," one that both encompasses and transcends the realm of the sexual in its fascination with witnessing the event of its own death.

Keywords: American, breast, *The Breast*, death, destruction, dying, *The Dying Animal*, Jewish, Kepesh, literature, novella, pornography, *The Professor of Desire,* Philip Roth, sexuality

> You don't want to *be* an animal, you want to observe your own animal functions, to get a mental thrill out of them. [. . .] As it is, what you want is pornography—looking at yourself in mirrors, watching your naked animal actions in mirrors, so that you can have it all in your consciousness, make it all mental.
>
> — D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (41, emphasis in original)

Some critics see Philip Roth's novel *The Dying Animal* (2001), the third installment of a loose trilogy that spans *The Breast* (1972) and *The Professor of Desire* (1977), as a stale reworking of themes that have already been covered in his earlier writings, a sentiment exemplified by Elaine Showalter's scathing review of the novel.[1] Jay Halio, however, provides a timely caveat as to how readers should interpret the novel's voice. "It is not likely," he remarks, "that [. . .] David Kepesh is Roth's surrogate" (165). Rather, Halio seems to suggest, *The Dying Animal* ought to be read as Kepesh's confession rather than

as Roth's diatribe, separating the writer from his character by recognizing the narrative as a literary performance rather than a direct authorial statement. It would be simplistic, in other words, to read the novel as a straightforward didactic affirmation of the views Kepesh expresses. Although Roth and his lead character no doubt share some of the withering diagnoses of modern culture that appear in the narrative, the transposition of these ideas into the realm of fiction has a crucial distancing effect. Indeed, *The Dying Animal* is marked throughout as a consciously staged performance, and it is this dramatic dimension that opens the novel's capacity for ironic self-reflection.

The process of rethinking the novel's voice has already taken a major step through Stephanie Cherolis's recent reading. Cherolis engages in a neo-Freudian analysis of *The Dying Animal*, arguing that Kepesh employs the confessional mode as a classic means of "working through" his feelings of loss and sadness (15). She distinguishes ordinary pornography from the "pornography of jealousy," the latter providing a means for gradually overcoming pain and resistance, to the point where Kepesh is able to accept responsibility for his actions. "Jealousy," she writes, "an emotion evoked by the possibility of losing a possession, takes away the distance, and, in turn, the pleasure, from pornography. It does not offer the escapist fantasy of pornography; rather, it requires that pain become internalized and therefore an extricable component of the sufferer's identity" (18). Cherolis concludes that Kepesh employs this technique to transform himself, with the aid of his newly gained self-knowledge, from an egotistical and unlikable character into one that evokes the sympathy of the reader—a contention that is "proven through Kepesh's meaningful relationship with Consuela" by the novel's end (22).

Although I welcome Cherolis's analysis as an alternative to the novel's initial critical reception, I nonetheless take a different interpretive approach. Cherolis subscribes to the general assumptions of classic Freudian thought, albeit filtered through the work of Jahan Ramazani, whereas my own reading is largely informed by one of Freud's major critics, D. H. Lawrence. Against the psychoanalytic practice of "working through," which Cherolis uses to ground her evaluation of Kepesh's character, Lawrence argues that Freud's technique is founded on a philosophical error. The root of humanity's psychological problems, contends Lawrence, derives from a modern cultural bias toward the intellect. Lawrence is not against thinking as such, but rather the ingrained habit of channeling all experiences through the mind. It is this imbalance that causes humanity to diminish or even lose its ability to experience the world directly, resulting in a separation from the full, physical experience of life. In an individual alienated from the world, each experience becomes a kind of "pornography," as Birkin says to Hermione in *Women in Love*, in which events are witnessed at a mental distance rather than being savored without mediation (41). It is this distancing effect that in turn sets up the trope of performance and spectatorship that pervades modern literature and culture, a theme exemplified in *The Dying Animal*.

The tone in which Kepesh tells the story and the intimate nature of the things he reveals bear the unmistakable marks of a confession, a set of revelations that is implicitly aimed at some sort of audience. The outpouring of Kepesh's heart, after all, is not directed toward an ideal reader located outside the text, but to a hushed and mostly silent companion. Kepesh's narrative is thus reframed by an implicit consciousness that, in the process of baring his soul, he is also engaged in an act of performance, and this submerged knowledge makes the sincerity of his confession inherently suspect. Kepesh is caught in a paradox explored in great depth by modernist theater, that as soon as something is placed within the frame of the stage (or in Kepesh's case, the novel), it is inevitably transported into the realm of the artificial. Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1922) is a classic example of this principle, as his play begins with the Characters (who are all figments of the author's imagination) bursting onto the stage in the middle of a "rehearsal" and insisting on their reality. Interrupted by this disturbance, the Actors halt the rehearsal and return to their "ordinary" selves (they become, in other words, actors pretending not to act, which is as close to sincerity as theater can achieve). But even the person who refuses to act, who tells the audience, "I am not acting, I refuse to perform anymore," is not exempt from this law of inherent artificiality, because everything within the frame, regardless of the will of the actor, is appropriated as a performance. The impact of this condition on Kepesh's character is visible in his self-conscious addiction to the drama of "staging" his persona. He is not merely dying—as he says, the real business of death mostly takes place out of sight, beneath the obscuring surface of the skin—he is performing the act of annihilation, making it visible in the same morbid way that modern culture observes the image of its own death throes.[2]

Although the pages of *The Dying Animal* are replete with images of sexuality and transgression, this characteristic alone does not make it a pornographic work. The pornographic aspect derives from the narcissistic, self-reflexive consciousness of Kepesh, who is obsessed with the dirty process of analyzing his own animalistic side: his sexuality, certainly, but that is only the most obvious manifestation of his more general fascination with digging through the sordid layers of his unconscious. As David J. Zucker observes, "Generally, we think of pornography *only* in terms of something 'obscene' or 'shocking' in matters sexual. Roth broadens that definition and equates death with obscenity and something shocking. What happens to our bodies—death—is seen as something obscene/shocking/pornographic" (138, emphasis in original). Kepesh takes horrified delight in witnessing his demise, exhibiting a repeated fascination with his own destruction. Kepesh is the dying animal of the title, itself a self-conscious allusion to Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," but he remains trapped in the performance of the present participle—endlessly observing the throes of death without ever achieving the final closure it promises.

Understanding Kepesh's fascination with performance forces the reader to reenvision the novel as a deconstruction (rather than an affirmation, as Show-

alter would have it) of phallic desire. In her landmark study *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (1989), Linda Williams contends that in the wake of Michel Foucault's influential work on the history of sexuality, a broader conception of "pornography-as-power" has gradually emerged, leading to a widespread critical shift away from analyzing pornography in terms of sex and morality (15). A similar notion of power informs the image Kepesh has fashioned for himself, and Roth repeatedly highlights its importance to the way his protagonist satisfies his notorious appetite for sexual adventure. As Kevin R. West points out, "David Kepesh is [. . .] filled with and defined by desires that take resolutely sexual forms but that encompass [. . .] more fundamental relations and frustrations" (225). The novel begins, for example, with Kepesh talking about the lure he derives from his status as a cultural commentator on television. Kepesh reflects on the side effects of this role:

> Over the past fifteen years, being cultural critic on the television program has made me fairly well known locally, and they're attracted to my class because of that. In the beginning, I didn't realize that talking on TV once a week for ten minutes could be so impressive as it turns out to be to these students. But they are helplessly drawn to celebrity, however inconsiderable mine might be. (*Dying Animal* 1)

Although he is talking here about his general popularity with students, this early passage points to an underlying narcissism that quickly translates into a self-assessment of his own desirability. The novel thus transitions from a discussion of Kepesh's pedagogical success to the way in which he uses this arena as a pool from which to draw his sexual partners. With a combination of professorial maneuvering and minor celebrity, Kepesh has carried on dozens of affairs with his students over the years. His success can be ascribed not so much to himself, he realizes, but to the outward persona he cultivates. Each affair is cunningly overcoded with distorted literary and cultural references, as his brief dalliance with Miranda, one of his young students, demonstrates.

The story of their coupling is peppered with allusions that, when examined closely, exude the unmistakable odor of perversion. Miranda, for instance, is initially identified as being "like the goat in the fairy tale that goes into the clock to hide," concealing herself in Kepesh's bathroom with the express purpose of sleeping with him after everyone else has left the party (7). Roth is referring here to the "The Wolf and the Seven Little Goats," a traditional German folk story famously retold by the Brothers Grimm, in which a mother goat outsmarts the wolf who has eaten all her children—all of them, that is, except the youngest, who escapes by hiding in the clock. Grounded in this fairy tale, Miranda's seduction has sinister overtones, as Kepesh implicitly identifies himself with the wolf, ready to devour his young (but perversely willing) prey.[3] The second reference is even more twisted, casting Miranda, the double of her namesake in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, as the incestuous lover of her "father," Prospero (played by Kepesh). Finally, when Miranda takes off her sweater, Kepesh compares her to "a young girl escaped from the

perilous melodrama of a Balthus painting"—a reference to Balthus's infamous *Jeune fille au chat* ("Young Girl with Cat," 1938), which depicts a young girl leaning back on a chair, the very image of unconscious, latent sexuality (7). Each allusion provides Kepesh with a role that casts him as a sexual predator, a devourer of women—and almost inevitably, some kind of animal.

Although such liaisons are intended to give Kepesh an obvious sense of power and pleasure, their force is not enduring. Lovers such as Miranda are too knowing, too aware that they are participating in their own perversion: they are like bad, wooden actors, unable to sink themselves deeply into a role. Kepesh's pornographic imagination has a built-in contempt for such lovers as shallow, obvious, and submissive—too much, at heart, like himself. What truly arouses his desire—and provides the central impetus in his attraction to Consuela, the romantic focus of his account—is an enduring uncertainty about whether the other partner is acting. When Kepesh spots Consuela in one of his lectures, he claims to have been immediately attracted to her. Yet his desire is not really fired until he starts to analyze the sophisticated interplay of naivete and self-awareness that he attributes to her character:

> You see the cleavage immediately. And you see she knows it. You see, despite the decorum, the meticulousness, the cautiously soigné style—or because of them—that she's aware of herself. She comes to the first class with the jacket buttoned over her blouse, yet some five minutes into the session, she has taken it off. When I glance her way again, I see that she's put it back on. So you understand that she's aware of her power but that she isn't sure yet how to use it, what to do with it, how much she even wants it. That body is still new to her, she's still trying it out, thinking it through, a bit like a kid walking the streets with a loaded gun and deciding whether he's packing it to protect himself or to begin a life of crime. (3–4)

Never for a second does Kepesh allow that the adjustments in Consuela's clothing could be thoughtless, uncalculated acts with little or no meaning. His moral pessimism—his supposition that deep down people know that they are artificial, corrupt—transforms everything into a performance, an act of power, a pornographic scene (sexual or otherwise) that is staged for his own narcissistic pleasure. Under Kepesh's tutelage, Consuela will gradually learn to play such a role, but it says a great deal about his character that he assumes some sort of staged repertoire from her even before they have met.

Kepesh thus appropriates Consuela as an actor, assigning her a place within his own private drama during which every move (whether she knows it) is given a theatrical significance. His patronizing description of her interest in art, for example, reinforces his construction of her as a naïve and untapped force. Her approach to art, he says, is "reverential" and "old-fashioned," a refreshing contrast to the cynicism that pervades his usual milieu (4). Kepesh goes on: "She stands there waiting for the surprising new sensation, the new thought, the new emotion, and when it won't come, ever, she chides herself for being inadequate and lacking [. . .] what? She chides herself for

not even knowing what it is she lacks" (4). Consuela is not "fresh meat" in the way that Miranda was. Consuela's enduring attraction comes from what Kepesh sees as her intractable naïveté, which is not the feigned innocence he encounters in other women, but starts out as an innocence akin to William Blake's little lamb: so innocent that it does not even understand its own innocence.

This being the case, Kepesh's project in seducing Consuela is to restage, in all its pathos, the transition from innocence to experience, to allow him to feel vicariously the corruption of knowledge as it consumes Consuela's being, gradually transforming her into his own fallen image. Sex is important in this drama because it is the cultural mechanism, the signifier that marks a transition point between animal (innocent) and human (self-conscious). Consuela's beauty is associated with her naïveté, which together create a barrier that sets her apart from the human world. Kepesh thus fulfills his need to degrade beauty by profaning it, an act that Georges Bataille decodes in this way:

> The further removed from the animal is their appearance, the more beautiful they [i.e., beautiful people] are reckoned. [. . .] If beauty so far removed from the animal is passionately desired, it is because to possess is to sully, to reduce to the animal level. Beauty is desired in order that it may be befouled; not for its own sake, but for the joy brought by the certainty of profaning it. (143–44)

Eroticism, Bataille concludes, is thus tied intimately to death, making Kepesh's deeper motivation in seducing Consuela not so much pleasure as a desire to share with her his pornographic vision of himself as a dying animal. Kepesh hopes to "cheat" the onset of death, using Consuela's naïveté as a kind of psychological shield. Zucker writes that Kepesh "cling[s] to sex as a talisman, as a way to prolong life, and to ward off death" (141). As long as youth and beauty such as hers are attracted to him, his existence is (nervously) assured, putting off death for the time being.

The paradox of Kepesh's attitude toward death lies in the desire to see his death, to witness the staging of his own destruction in a pornographic sense. So all-encompassing is his ego that he casts himself as an American hero, strutting across the stage of history in an alternative, non-Puritan history of the United States. Just as rock 'n' roll music reflected the sexual awakening of the 1960s, Kepesh contends, so too Shakespeare (rather improbably) inspired Thomas Morton and the other early non-Puritans settlers at the Merry Mount trading station. "Shakespeare is Morton's rock-and-roll," he says (*Dying Animal* 59). Because of his respect for the indigenous people and his open attitude toward sex, Morton and his establishment won the ire of the nearby Puritan settlers at Plymouth. Merry Mount simultaneously horrified and fascinated the Puritans, and although they persecuted Morton on the one hand, their youth flocked to him on the other. Ever since, contends Kepesh, the history of America has been divided between the dominant Puritan tradition, which has sought to suppress freedom—and, in particular, sexuality—and the non-Puritan attitude encapsulated by Merry Mount. In his view, therefore,

the sexual revolution should be seen as part of an age-old culture war between these two political visions for America:

> No, the sixties weren't aberrant. [. . .] The Puritans were the agents of rule and godly virtue and right reason, and on the other side was misrule. But why is it rule and misrule? Why isn't Morton the great theologian of no-rules? Why isn't Morton seen for what he is, the founding father of personal freedom? In the Puritan theocracy you were at liberty to do good; in Morton's Merry Mount you were at liberty—that was it. (61)

The history of Merry Mount has been suppressed by the historians, according to Kepesh, because of its relentlessly candid, antiestablishment vision for the New World. It opposed the authoritarianism of the Puritans and their successors, who sought to tame and limit freedom in the name of stability and order. For Kepesh, it is the legacy of Morton that has made America truly great, that has maintained its ongoing tradition of preserving personal freedom in the face of the Puritan hegemony, and of which he is the enduring keeper of the flame.

The account of Thomas Morton is crucial to Roth's critique because it reinforces Kepesh's grandiose historical sense of himself. Kepesh measures his life and actions, public and private, on the metaphorical stage of history, as though he is *zeitgeist*, the personal embodiment of the waning historical energy of his culture—"*La révolution, c'est moi.*"[4] This megalomaniacal act of blurring public and private history draws Kepesh, as he considers the possibility of facing his own death, into seeing the world around him as being similarly on the brink of destruction. The revolution of the 1960s is fast diminishing, and so too, as far as Kepesh is concerned, is the Mortonian spirit. As such, the triumph of conservatism represents a cultural death that parallels Kepesh's own process of dying. Beneath the vital surface of Kepesh's observations, therefore, Roth inserts a hidden, ontological cancer that eats away at his being, inverting the apparent health of his values and transforming them into something resentful and nihilistic. Kepesh is implicated in this process, for he is cognizant of the forces that undermine true freedom. In his description of the sexual revolution, for example, he is quick to distinguish between Janie Wyatt's *Gutter Girls* and the ideologically driven actions of people such as Bernardine Dohrn and Kathy Boudin (both members of the Weather Underground, a revolutionary left-wing terrorist group active in the late 1960s and early 1970s) or Betty Friedan (one of the key advocates of modern feminism, especially through her landmark book *The Feminine Mystique* [1963]). As Kepesh describes the 1960s, "There were two strains to the turbulence: there was the libertarianism extending orgiastic permission to the individual and opposed to the traditional interests of the community, but with it, often wedded to it, there was the communal righteousness about civil rights and against the [Vietnam] war, the disobedience whose moral prestige devolves through Thoreau" (55). Revolutionary thought is not just morally right for Kepesh; it must be "orgiastic" and thus grounded in physical rather than intellectual pleasure. Kepesh thus grasps the essence of Lawrence's critique of the empha-

sis that modern culture has placed on the intellect. Janie's sexual revolution was about personal freedom rather than political ideology, true liberation rather than a quasi-Puritan reinforcement of a dubiously "new" social ideal.

Roth creates an important divide, nonetheless, between Janie Wyatt and David Kepesh, one that revolves around the deceptively simple matter of self-awareness. Because Kepesh is in his thirties at the time of the sexual revolution, he possesses something of a critical distance from it. He is not swept up in its spontaneous tide, but instead is allowed to choose whether or not he will participate; unlike Janie Wyatt, Kepesh is simultaneously a participant and an outside observer of the 1960s. The sexual revolution thus emerges in the novel as a key moment in which Kepesh's personal history blends with the historical struggle between the two Americas:

> People fifteen, twenty years younger than I, the privileged beneficiaries of the revolution, could afford to go through it unconsciously. [. . .] But I had to think. There I was, still in the prime of life and the country entering into this extraordinary time. Am I or am I not a candidate for this wild, sloppy, raucous repudiation, this wholesale wrecking of the inhibitive past? Can I master the discipline of freedom as opposed to the recklessness of freedom? How does one turn freedom into a system? (64)

Kepesh's problem lies in his contradictory desire to transform freedom, the revolution, something that by its very nature is fluid, dynamic, indefinable, and squeeze it into the suffocating rigidity of a philosophical system. The factor that repeatedly destroys the integrity—the health—of Kepesh's desire, therefore, is his "pornographic" addiction to self-awareness. Outwardly, he preaches the Lawrencian value of instinct, of being spontaneous, of the beauty of unconscious grace, but his real pleasure in each instance lies in overturning these qualities both in himself and in the object of his lust.

His affair with Consuela, for example, is repeatedly cast in these voyeuristic terms. Roth details two particularly important moments of perversion in their sexual encounters. In the first instance, Kepesh, tired of the conventionality of their lovemaking, seizes Consuela's passive body and brutally rapes her mouth. Her response, after this violent act, is to snap at him with her teeth, an expression of primal orality: "At last the forthright, incisive, elemental response from the contained classical beauty. Till then it was all controlled by narcissism, by exhibitionism, and despite the energetic display, despite the audacity, it was strangely inert" (31). Consuela's spontaneity serves to obscure Kepesh's general lack of it—for while this violent action yielded an instinctive reaction from its object, it was a calculated, self-conscious effect on his part. As West writes, "Kepesh seems incapable of being the master of the desire he follows, rather only its subject" (236–37). To mask his craving for passivity, Kepesh projects an external façade of absolute control and self-possession, the very image of one of Sade's cool and cynical libertines, but his secret wish is to have that image shattered by someone with sufficient power to challenge his hegemony. The violation of Consuela's mouth is designed to goad her into

action: "The instinctual girl bursting not just the container of her vanity but the captivity of her cozy Cuban home. It was the true beginning of her mastery—the mastery into which my mastery had initiated her. I am the author of her mastery of me" (*Dying Animal* 32). Consuela seizes hold of this power, but only because Kepesh has self-consciously granted it to her: it is through this complicated agency that a gradual shift in their relationship takes place.

The pages that follow this incident reflect Kepesh's growing fascination with the animal image of himself in the wake of this sexual breakthrough. He observes, for a start, that old age is something that cannot be imagined. "I couldn't," he says. "I had no idea what it was like. Not even a false image—no image" (35). But the rapid approach of his death not only provides him with an image, it also allows him to be both inside and outside of himself at the same time: "But the end? It is, interestingly, the first time of life that you stand entirely outside of while you're in it" (35). As his thoughts return to Consuela, he notices a similar development in their relationship. Kepesh reflects on

> [t]he pornography of jealousy. The pornography of one's own destruction. I am rapt, I am enthralled, and yet I am enthralled *outside* the frame. What is it that puts me outside? It is age. [. . .] It's a representation, ordinary pornography. It's a fallen art form. It's not just make-believe, it's patently insincere. [. . .] Because you're an invisible accomplice in the act, ordinary pornography takes the torment out while mine keeps the torment in. In my pornography you identify yourself not with the satiate, with the person who is getting it, but with the person not getting it, with the person losing it, with the person who has lost. (41–42, emphasis in original)

Like a doctor describing his own cancer, Kepesh correctly diagnoses, as he does repeatedly throughout the book, the nihilism that undermines his ontological health. It becomes his "pornography of destruction." Such extreme self-awareness problematizes Cherolis's assessment of the novel's ending, one in which Kepesh finds redemption through confession. Kepesh's desire to see Consuela at the novel's end does not prove, as Cherolis asserts, that he has overcome his problems via the self-knowledge he has attained from this confession. Indeed, the final words of the novel, spoken by Kepesh's interlocutor, assert that the visit will "finish" him (156). But the force of this statement lies in its general rather than its particular truth: if Kepesh goes to see Consuela, it will confirm that he is incapable of breaking the compulsive performance of the pornography of destruction on which his alienation rests. In this way, his problem subverts the classic analytical assumption that knowledge, in and of itself, can provide the path to authenticity.

The novel's second sexual perversion, which sees Kepesh wanting to drink Consuela's menstrual blood, shows the extent of the transition in his character after Consuela is put in charge. Whereas the rape of Consuela's mouth was "shocking," placing Kepesh in a position of brutal and unquestionable domination, his

later vampiric desire is designed to signal his abject submission to her. What gives this act added significance in Kepesh's eyes is that it replicates an episode from Consuela's early sex life with her boyfriend Carlos. Anticipating his own performance, Kepesh runs through a reenactment of the scene in his own mind:

> Picture it. After school, the bathroom, suburban Bergen County, and the two of them transfixed by the enigma of her discharge as though they are Adam and Eve. Because Carlos is enchanted too. He too knows she is a work of art, classical art, beauty in its classical form, but alive, alive, and the aesthetic response to beauty alive is what, class? Desire. Yes, Carlos is her mirror. Men have always been her mirror. (46)

Roth constructs this scene as pure pornography, so that Kepesh's appeal for us to "picture it" is directed toward an audience—to himself, but also to his unknown listener, to the reader, and even, in a moment of rhetorical irony, to his imaginary "class." Like Carlos (or rather, this imaginary, projected view of him), Kepesh wants to be the mirror in which Consuela admires herself, so that their sex is transformed into a kind of onesided, narcissistic masturbation in which he is virtually annihilated.

This pornographic perspective extends beyond Kepesh, Roth demonstrates, to reflect an outlook that has spread like a disease into the very structure of modern culture. The delusion of phallic power comes from the belief that the world can be reshaped, without complications, in one's own image. But as Maurice Blanchot, commenting on the myth of Narcissus, observes, "[M]an [. . .] can make himself in accordance with the image, but this means that he is still more apt to unmake himself in accordance with the image, exposing himself to the illusion of a similitude that may be beautiful, or fatal, but which is in any case the illusion of an evasive death that consists entirely in the repetition of a mute misapprehension" (126). Roth symbolizes this broader social narcissism, for example, through Kepesh's thoughts on the turn of the millennium, a worldwide moment of celebration that lacks any identifiable meaning:

> We watched the New Year coming in around the world, the mass hysteria of no significance that was the millennial New Year's Eve celebration. [. . .T]he mockery of the Armageddon that we'd been awaiting. [. . .] And it never came. Maybe that's what everyone was celebrating—that it hadn't come, never came, that the disaster of the end will now never arrive. [. . .] The Big Ending, though no one knows what, if anything, is ending and certainly no one knows what is beginning. It's a wild celebration of no one knows what. (144, 148)

Consuela's discovery that she has cancer, coupled with the death of his close friend George O'Hearn, only reinforces Kepesh's role as a spectator: he is watching, bearing witness, not to the actual destruction of his personal world, but rather the narcissistic image he has created of it. It is this ambivalent hunger for the pornography of destruction that ruins not only the authenticity of Kepesh's approaching death but also reveals the underlying nihilism of his left-wing revolutionary politics.[5] Kepesh's narcissism is destroying his instinctive vitality, the real "dying animal" of the title: he does not want to be an

animal, as Lawrence observes. He only wants to watch, via his intellect, the death throes of the existence he has imagined for himself.

NOTES

1. There is an excellent overview of the reviewers' initial reception of *The Dying Animal* and the question of distinguishing Roth's voice from that of his protagonist in Kevin R. West's "Professing Desire: The Kepesh Novels" (see 232–33 in particular).
2. An idea reiterated by Aimee Pozorski in her analysis of *The Dying Animal*, although she views Roth's point in this novel almost entirely as a sociopolitical commentary on the current political status of America's place in the world.
3. Of course, there are further complications here: the smallest goat is the one who escapes in the original tale and proceeds to plot the wolf's downfall with her mother. But if the smallest goat willingly gives herself to the wolf, the mother's hand in killing the wolf is eliminated—thus, the wolf "overcomes" (or at least puts off) death in this scenario. No doubt the clock also has added significance in relation to Kepesh's sense of impending death.
4. An echo of Louis XIV's famous statement, "*L'état, c'est moi*" ("I am the state"). I reference it here, in particular, because Kepesh describes the political values of Consuela's family as being "love Reagan, love Bush, hate Kennedy, rich New Jersey Cubans to the right of Louis XIV" (Roth 45–46).
5. Roth is not engaging in this critique of left-wing thought to promote a right-wing agenda, of course. To understand Roth's position, it is important to note the similarities between his politics and those of the nineteenth-century Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky. Early in his life, Dostoevsky was a left-wing activist, narrowly avoiding execution for his involvement with the Petrashevsky Circle. After a spell in prison, he became increasingly critical of the hypocrisy he perceived within left-wing politics. His later novels frequently explore the ethical contradictions of revolutionary thought, exemplified by his brilliant portrayals of such nihilistic characters as Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Peter Verkhovensky in *The Devils* (1872), and Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880, Rpt. as *The Karamazov Brothers*, 1994). Roth acknowledges his debt to Dostoevsky by having Kepesh label himself "Kenny's Karamazov father" and describing Kenny Kepesh as "all the brothers Karamazov in one" (78).

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